

Workthoughts

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The Saturday Read – Revisiting ‘The Sage of Waterloo’ by Leona Francombe

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Two hundred and one years ago, on June 18, 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte led his troops in battle against those of the Duke of Wellington on a farm three miles south of Waterloo in Belgium. At the end of the day, close to 50,000 soldiers were dead and French domination of the continent came to an end.

A number of books were published last spring to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the bloodshed. One, *‘The Sage of Waterloo’* (<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/The-Sage-of-Waterloo/>) by Leona Francombe (<http://www.leonafrancombe.com>), recalls events through a very different form of ‘oral history’. For this ‘Saturday Read’ we return to Hougoumont.

“Hougoumont is...dear me, where are the words? It’s a mute place, you see, but with such startling eloquence. Perhaps the fact that few visitors to the battlefield even know it exists fosters the air of an unopened message. Physically speaking, it’s a ruin: a decaying farmstead of brick and sandstone in perfect complicity with the land. The other, less tangible things are far more difficult to describe. Go there yourself and you’ll feel it: the knowing wind; the trees scarred as leviathans; and a strange sort of peace that isn’t peaceful at all but alert with memory and other, less palatable phenomena. Sometimes, when the wind comes off the eastern fields, it’s as if a worn curtain is shifting, and through a tear in the fabric you can see something unimaginable for such a sleepy backwater.”

I reviewed (<https://workthoughts.com/2015/07/11/the-saturday-read-leona-francombe-the-sage-of-waterloo/>) this exquisite story last year, and after this week of tragedy in Orlando and Birstall, West Yorkshire, ‘The Sage’ seemed to beckon from the bookshelf, inviting a return to the wisdom of Old Lavender.

““Nature never truly recovers from human cataclysms,” Grandmother said one day, to me alone. “Never.” She was using that tone: two parts old sage, one part female warrior, scant affection and no salt... Every creature who was anywhere near Waterloo sensed what was going to happen,” she explained. “If they could get out, they got out. Those who stayed and survived passed the experience on through collective memory, right down through the generations until the present day. Collective memory... and resonance.””

Author Francombe is a pianist and composer whose lyrical interpretation (<http://www.leonafrancombe.com/music.html>) of history, through a narrator at ‘ground level’, delivers a timely reminder –